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Working Class: Challenging Myths About Blue-Collar Labor

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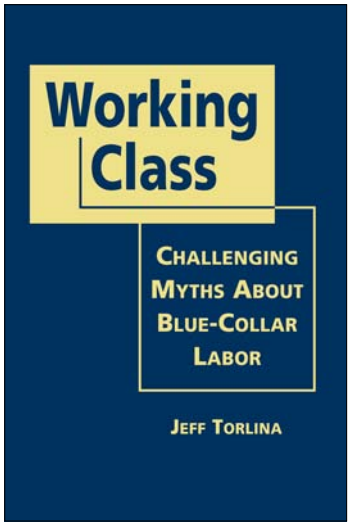

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The Meaning of Work

BLUE-COLLAR WORK IS MISUNDERSTOOD. Its meaning has changed over time so that its nature is identified differently by various groups that have contrasting relationships to blue-collar occupations and to manual workers. Today's society is marked by the disappearance of the large numbers of manufacturing and agricultural jobs that were once the backbone of the economy. As blue-collar jobs are outsourced, we have witnessed the decline of the labor unions and trade organizations that used to champion not only workers' interests but also their image. The loss of working-class institutions has left few voices to speak highly of workers, and popular culture now displays contempt for "dirty" jobs and those who do them. As the philosopher-mechanic Matthew Crawford recently lamented,[1] US society has turned its back on the blue-collar trades and now pushes young people into college, rather than instilling skills and appreciation for physically productive vocations. Contemporary images in popular culture degrade working-class people,[2] due greatly to the negative depiction of their manual labor. As Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft* shows, however, there is an undercurrent in working-class communities that defies that negative identity. Those who perform manual labor recognize it as satisfying and deeply meaningful.

Consider a recent example: On August 6, 2007, a horrific cave-in at the Crandall Canyon coal mine in central Utah killed six miners. Ten days later three other men died in a second cave-in while trying to rescue the original six. As the national media and government agencies swarmed into the area, community members created a website, crandallcanyonvoices.com, to communicate information, provide support, express feelings, and explain their perspective on the disaster. The residents of this small mining town realized that outsiders would define

their jobs and their industry in ways different from their own, so they attempted to present their viewpoint on the tragic events and their occupations through the online forum. In the aftermath of the disaster, and knowing that coal mining has a negative image in the minds of most Americans, one of the miners posted his feelings about working in the mine: "I love my job. I don't have to do it. There are a lot of jobs I could take but I love mining. It has its risks but there are jobs that are more dangerous. I am a coal miner. I am good at what I do. Unlike many people who sit in their cubicles all day miserable, I really like going to work most days." Another miner posted, "I worked for the railroad when I was young, but the day I quit and went to work in the coal mine, I thought I had died and gone to heaven."[3]

There is a paradox in the words of these men. Their statements were made in relation to the catastrophe that killed several of their coworkers and injured many others. This disaster was only the latest to kill miners, and it would not be the last. Not only does coal mining take the lives of workers with an alarming regularity, the work is dirty and strenuous. If that were not enough, it also takes place deep underground, where the working conditions test psychological strength as much as physical capacities. The love for the job that these miners express is difficult for many people to understand. How can men declare satisfaction, commitment, even love for work that is dirty, taxing, and potentially lethal?

The answers are complicated. It is something one truly needs to experience to understand, but in the chapters that follow nearly three dozen blue-collar workers will do their best to explain it through formal interviews in which they were asked the same question posed by sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd in their famous *Middletown* study published in 1929: "Why do they work so hard?" That question began the research for this book, but the inquiry quickly became fixated on the many different ways that work was central to the laborers' identities, to their self-esteem, and to their worldviews. Rather than the depictions of subservience, alienation, and meaninglessness that describe blue-collar work in social-science textbooks, it became clear that these workers were proud of their trades and their products. They felt important in their skills and their efforts, and many of them regarded manual labor as the essential ingredient to an honorable and meaningful life.

This book will explain why working-class people find blue-collar work rewarding and meaningful, in spite of its stresses, dangers, and physical challenges, but the book is more deeply concerned with the difference between the workers' expressions of satisfaction and the way sociologists define their situations. It is understandable that those who

have never lived in working-class communities or had blue-collar careers would fail to comprehend the motives and rewards of manual work. Unfortunately, that has not stopped researchers from making explicit and implicit claims about it. It is even common for intellectuals to assert that they understand the workers' situations better than the workers themselves.[4] Such perspectives can be frustrating to working-class people, as the Utah mining community articulated on its website in the aftermath of the cave-in: "Residents are currently watching certain political leaders haggle over the Crandall tragedies and the future of the coal industry without the proper knowledge needed to guide their assessments in a fair and constructive manner—knowledge which comes from living in a coal mining community and working within a mine."

Sociologists do not influence the lives of working-class people as directly as "certain political leaders" may, but their impact is felt, even if less directly. Science has power in Western society, and the theoretical conceptions of blue-collar work grant legitimacy to the negative images of working-class people in the broader popular culture. Media images that portray the blue-collar worker as, in the words of Michael Parenti, a "laughable buffoon"[5] are endorsed by those theories, providing the stereotypes with the authority of science. Sociologists did not cause the prejudiced view of the working class, but they give it empirical support. The assumptions of inferiority in the working class further justify, or make sense of, circumstances that degrade working-class people. When blue-collar jobs are exported overseas, there is a tacit acceptance that such jobs are not necessary or desired. When wages fall for production workers, it appears reasonable. When family farms go out of business, few people are alarmed. Seemingly rational social policies promote or condone the loss of working-class neighborhoods and institutions. The destruction of urban and rural economies and communities is seen as simply the cost of progress. The treatment of working-class people by teachers, by police, by judges, by employers, and by strangers encountered on the street is shaped by negative connotations that are confirmed in the social-science literature because theoretical generalizations of blue-collar work focus only on its negative components.

The Importance of Work

Work is one of the central institutional experiences in human life. It is much more than simply a means of earning money: it impacts where people live, how they live, and, for many people, why they live. Americans

typically spend more time on the job than in any other single activity. Their identities are tied to their occupations in psychological as well as in social terms. By any measure, work is a very important part of existence.

Work is also an important concept for determining status and identity. It has always been crucial for sociology. Work was the central concept for Karl Marx and another foundational theorist, Emile Durkheim, who made the division of labor the principal variable in his most important research project.[6] In the twentieth century, work became the primary indicator for social-class membership. Harold Kerbo, a noted expert on class inequality, explains that *working-class*—which he makes synonymous with *blue-collar*—describes people of "low skill levels" who hold mid-to-low positions:

> *Working-class* or *blue-collar* people occupy mid-level to low positions within the occupational structure. Working-class occupations are typically characterized by relatively low skill level, lower education, and a lower degree of complexity, as well as manual instead of nonmanual labor.[7]

Other stratification scholars concur. For example, Pat Ainley states that the sociological definition of class "follows conventional distinctions between manual and nonmanual work."[8] Leonard Beeghley asserts, "The essence of middle-class life is to do nonmanual labor."[9] "Manual labor," Beeghley says, is "the essence of working-class life."[10]

The association of work with class membership makes the depiction of blue-collar work crucial to the portrayal of the working class in general. When *working-class* and *blue-collar* are essentially the same concept, the characterization of blue-collar work connotes the same traits in those who perform manual labor. When blue-collar work is not fully understood, it distorts the identity of working-class people. Sociologists have been good at describing the disadvantages of blue-collar work, such as how it is exploited, but they have generally paid little attention to workers' personal connection to their manual jobs and how they are rewarded or satisfied. Those who prefer working in a dark, dirty, dangerous coal mine over a cubical in a comfortable, safe office building are a riddle to social researchers. Leading theories fail to adequately explain why manual laborers express love for their jobs. When blue-collar work is seen only for its negative aspects, it directly translates to the negative portrayal of working-class citizens.

Working-class life is multidimensional and therefore impossible to explain in simple terms. Like all class positions, there are wide-ranging

experiences that may be positive in some ways, while negative in others. This is true for blue-collar work itself. Theories of blue-collar work typically focus on structural factors but disregard the cultural meanings of work. This is useful in some ways, but it provides an incomplete picture. We must take a deeper look at what it means to do blue-collar work. There are many shortcomings in manual jobs: they can be dangerous, they can be difficult and dirty, and they can be exploited. But there are also positive aspects of blue-collar work.

The conception of blue-collar work is too often limited to its deficiencies, while the satisfying dimensions are ignored or marginalized. The standpoint of blue-collar workers presents a more complex story. Their jobs are far from ideal, but the values of working-class people make their jobs meaningful and rewarding in many ways. In the name of scientific accuracy, and to correct the distortions through which working-class people are seen by middle-class society, the gap between the meaning of work for manual workers and the meaning of work in social theory must be narrowed.

A Fresh Look at Blue-Collar Work

This book is part of a growing movement in the scholarly literature to reevaluate blue-collar work and its place in working-class life. Recent scholarship compliments long traditions of class analysis in sociology by highlighting aspects of working-class jobs and lifestyles that provide rewards, meaning, and identities in ways that are not often granted in professional occupations and communities. Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009) persuasively argues that blue-collar work is a source of dignity and a meaningful expression of intellect, skill, and importance. Mike Rose's *The Mind at Work* (2005) eloquently shows that blue-collar work is at once exploited, exhausting, dirty, dangerous, insecure, and frustrating, but that it is also a source of honor, knowledge, identity, pride, and relationships to things larger than the individual.[11] Rose also shows that blue-collar work demands intelligence in ways that are rarely acknowledged by scholars. There are multiple dimensions of blue-collar work, both in terms of what workers put into their jobs and what they get from them, yet both of these authors criticize dominant scholarship and popular culture for narrowly focusing on the negative dimensions. Rewards of physical work are often overlooked, allowing white-collar society generally to consider manual labor a source of stigma and oppression.

This book adds dimension to the analysis of blue-collar work through interviews with working-class men. It uses the interviews, which were grounded in ethnography, to critique the concepts of work and class as they are used in social research. This book is, in fact, written by a mason with seventeen years experience in the construction trade. The interviews were formal, semistructured, and tape-recorded, but at the same time they were conversations between fellow workers, rather than interrogations between upper-middle-class scientists and men of the working class. These particular workers cannot represent all working-class people, but they collectively make a strong case that there are highly consistent values and attitudes among a broad cross section of blue-collar workers that define working-class jobs and lives in positive ways. The interviews with a wide variety of workers from construction trades and from factories present a convincing challenge to the theoretical image of blue-collar work and workers that are used in most sociological research.

The dominant conception of blue-collar work is not altogether wrong, but it is incomplete. Blue-collar work is defined according to only a few characteristics, but it is actually a multidimensional experience. The prevailing definitions of work and workers deny the many ways that work has meaning and how it influences the identities of workers. From the perspective of the workers, the manual trades are a source of dignity and satisfaction. When blue-collar workers are allowed to explain their outlook on their class position, they clearly recognize the stigma that white-collar classes apply to their status, but they also describe why they disregard that partisan judgment in favor of their own viewpoint, which sees their standing as honorable and important.

Class-Based Cultures

The world is viewed differently by working-class and professional-class people. What is important, honorable, and desirable may be understood according to different standards. Just as hobbies, tastes, manners, language, and so forth are often different between shop-floor workers and white-collar managers, work has different meanings for the two groups. Charles Sabel explained in his 1982 book *Work and Politics* how blue-collar workers have little concern for the things office workers will fight to defend. Likewise, the things that define fulfillment and dignity in blue-collar work have little importance for white-collar managers.[12]

The act of producing raw materials through extractive industries and agriculture, as well as physically transforming those raw materials into finished products, is remarkably meaningful in the lives of those who work in those fields. Other manual jobs require that workers physically engage with their subject matter. The conditions of that work shape the values and living standards of working-class people. Moreover, successfully engaging in those occupations requires that workers value the principles of craftsmanship in their trade or field, that they have a willingness to take on the physical and mental challenges of that labor, and that they engage in the community of their peers. The result is a subculture in which values, norms, identities, and worldviews are shared among those whose lives revolve around blue-collar labor. A distinct working-class culture is not as strong today as it was a hundred years ago, but working-class values still lead working-class people to desire the things found in blue-collar work. A working-class worldview presents many reasons for investing in, and obtaining meaning from, blue-collar work, even though it might not be appreciated by other classes.

White-collar labor, too, has a requisite set of attitudes, values, identities, and views of the world that make sense of the demands and living standards associated with white-collar work. A subculture emerged among those who collectively live and work in white-collar circles. That professional-class culture recognizes attributes of white-collar work in positive terms. The two cultural experiences—white-collar/blue-collar—are different in many respects and they therefore require sets of ideas that are also different in order to make sense of those divergent experiences.

The professionals who shape the images of working-class people in social theory and in the media present those depictions from the standpoint of their culture. The portrayal of working-class people in social research and in popular culture reflects a cultural logic that does not accurately apply to working-class experiences. The behavior of working-class people does not always make sense to those who do not share their cultural logic. Professionals tend therefore to squeeze their explanations for blue-collar workers' actions into their own logical framework. Actions and motives of working-class people, which may be rational from the perspective of working-class culture, are construed by professionals in negative terms.

The individuals who historically have made up the social sciences came from the professional class.[13] That explains why blue-collar workers are described negatively in early scholarship.[14] A classic example is Fredrick Winslow Taylor's influential writing on scientific management.

Taylor describes the most suitable laborer as "so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type."[15] In more recent decades, scholars from the working class have entered the academy and have brought an important alternative perspective to the study of society. The nature of science, however, makes it resistant to new perspectives. Scholars engaging with the discourse of their discipline must confront traditional theories and do so in the language already established by their predecessors. The result is that even working-class researchers must use the prevailing conceptual framework if they are to be accepted by the established community of scholars. Devalued conceptions of working-class people are thus perpetuated over time, even by those with working-class origins.

Professionals have applied their values to the understanding of social-class differences. Working-class lifestyles and occupations are defined negatively partly because professionals regard them as distasteful. Growing up in a professional household leads people to prefer white-collar jobs and to value lifestyles associated with those positions. There is an assumption inherent in theories of social class that blue-collar work is inferior to white-collar work. The theories reflect white-collar values. Theorists fail to realize that the working class possesses alternative cultural understandings for blue-collar work and working-class lifestyles that define those experiences as meaningful and rewarding. The next chapter begins to present those cultural understandings that were communicated in interviews with blue-collar workers. The following is a brief selection of those factory and construction workers' statements as an illustration of their positive connection to their work.

Workers' Attitudes About Their Jobs

Like the miners who express enjoyment for their blue-collar jobs, all but one of the thirty-one men in this sample said they enjoyed their blue-collar work. A brief selection of statements from the sampled factory and construction workers will give a feeling for this. A thirty-seven-year-old shipping/receiving worker said: "I enjoy it. It is what I like to do." A fifty-three-year-old pipe fitter from a silicone factory said:

> I am rewarded in every way I can be. Fiscally, they pay me good. I am rewarded mentally; I am occasionally mentally challenged—a job that has not been done, this is new; we don't know what is going

> to happen; can we do it? Physically, I like to get in there and do it. I like nothing better than going home and feeling great. They pay me to take a shower. I take a shower before I go home, before I leave. I say, "What a country!" We always joke around. It's great.

A twenty-nine-year-old union mason's laborer did not like the fact that work tended to slow during the winter months. With that exception, he said, "It's great." When asked if he ever wished he had a different job when things were busy, he replied, "No, no. Nope. I like it. I enjoy it. I enjoy the hard work. It keeps your body fit, and your health—it *does*."

Another construction laborer, thirty years old, nonunion, and working with concrete, also said he enjoys his job:

> I'm happy with what I'm doing. I'm still doing it [since his junior year in high school] . . . because I wake up in the morning and I don't feel unhappy and I feel happy that I'm going to work. I don't dread getting up and I have a smile on my face. . . . It is my job. I don't know how to explain it. I don't know, I just get up every day and do it. I love it.

Yet another union construction laborer, with the job that is lowest in the construction-site hierarchy, discussed his enjoyment of the work. At sixty-three years old, he admitted that the enjoyment of work is rarely there for him anymore because the physical demands place a toll on his aging body. Until recently, however, he reported his love for the job: "I just really thrive on hard work. I really liked it. Like I said, it sounds foolish, it's just the way I felt."

A welder at a locomotive factory who has an engineering bachelor's degree from a prestigious university explains, "Yes I do keep on going back because it is something I enjoy. I enjoy welding. I enjoy the precision part of welding—the really technical part of welding I enjoy." A different welder from another factory revealed some of what he liked about his job: "I like welding. Like when the hood comes down, it is just you and the fire, you know, and the sparks. You can see the puddle of steel. When you are welding steel, it is like water. The art is to control the puddle. You can watch it move as you are progressing up the plate. Plus, I think one of the things that attracted me to welding is I always grew up believing in honor. I used to read about knights in armor. The welding hood is a lot like a knight's helmet. I mean, this might sound weird, but I guess that is how I got into it. That is what I like about it."

A worker in the short shop of a sawmill insisted: "I love it, absolutely."[16] A thirty-seven-year-old union member who operated heavy construction equipment went further:

> WORKER: I have to admit every day, I can probably count on one hand the days that I actually never wanted to go to work. I really enjoy my job. I love it.
> AUTHOR: The attitude is that everybody that does blue-collar work hates it and wouldn't want to do it, that kind of thing.
> WORKER: No, that's the farthest thing from my mind. . . . I am getting beat to death [from the jarring of the excavation machines]. As much as I enjoy the work, I think that there is an easier way to make more money . . . but there is only so far up the ladder you can go as an operator. You have to get into foreman, which means I have to give up the equipment, which I'm not going to do. I enjoy it too much.

An assembler in a locomotive factory said, "I build choo-choos. I like it. . . . Honestly, I never imagined a job could be this good. Really!" A winder in a turbine manufacturing plant who went from high school right into the factory said, "I enjoy it. I enjoy getting dirty." He said getting dirty was proof that he "did something." A forty-nine-year-old man who had recently left his factory maintenance job to farm full-time also reported liking his factory job—a job he took specifically to pay the mortgage on his farm. "It just happened that I really did enjoy the work and was appreciated there."

A fifty-two-year-old carpenter, when asked if his job had become routine or monotonous after thirty-three years, replied, "No, no, I still enjoy getting up and going to work. I do." This man reported having a difficult time when he first began his construction job at nineteen. After about a year on the job things changed for the young man:

> And I began to enjoy what I was doing. In the beginning it was very stressful. I'd come home at night and wonder, "There is no way I can do this. I don't have a clue what is going on, but at this point this is what I need to do." And then six months later I'd come home and say to my wife, "I want to tell you what I did today. I was four floors up and we were setting these gigantic beams, walking on a twelve-inch concrete wall, and I felt wonderful doing it." And all of a sudden you become a part of this and people gave me responsibility quickly and I enjoyed the responsibility.

A thirty-two-year-old carpenter/supervisor said, "I'm happy with what I do. Like I've been saying all along, you've got to want to do what you do and if you don't like what you do you shouldn't be doing it."

These men exemplify the typical experience of workers in this sample: they report that their blue-collar jobs are rewarding. The only men to express any reservation were two assembly-line workers—a predictable response for that job category, according to Robert Blauner in his 1964 book *Alienation and Freedom.* Even these men, however, reported rewarding aspects of their jobs. The bulk of Blauner's data for his research on alienation in factory work was quantitative, resulting from secondary analysis of a survey that included "three thousand blue-collar factory workers in sixteen different factory industries." It contrasts with the qualitative nature of the data reported in this book, which identifies multidimensional aspects of work's meaning. The data herein reveal the work of the men interviewed to be anything but alienating. There *are* aspects of blue-collar work that the men report as negative, but the overall assessment of almost all was positive.

Working-Class Definitions of Blue-Collar Work

The following are depictions of blue-collar work that emerged from the interviews with the workers. The list is not exhaustive of all the potential meanings associated with blue-collar work, but it is representative of consistent themes from the interviews and it adds dimension to existing descriptions of blue-collar labor in the sociological literature. The characteristics of the work that are well documented elsewhere, such as the negative dimensions, are not discussed, but they should not be forgotten. The following portrayal of work emphasizes things that challenge the prevailing image of blue-collar jobs, but previous, less-influential research has also documented each point. Supportive evidence from published research is acknowledged in later chapters.

Blue-collar work is complicated. The first thing to make clear before discussing the meaning of blue-collar work in working-class culture is that it cannot be understood in simplistic terms. Not only is work multidimensional, with its meaning understood according to a number of factors, but it is also both negative and positive—often at the very same time and in a variety of ways. Sweeping generalizations characterize the distinction between white-collar and blue-collar work in the social-science literature. There is little recognition that jobs are sometimes rewarding and some-

times unfulfilling—that positive aspects of a job may sit alongside negative attributes. As is often the case when thinking about social issues, the complexity of work is typically ignored in favor of reductionist definitions of situations. It is the role of theory to simplify reality into generalizable categories, but in the case of work and other closely related concepts such as social class, this has failed to acknowledge alternative cultural standards.

Blue-collar work is rewarding. There is a long tradition in social-science research that defines blue-collar work as rewarding in extrinsic ways only. Work is important for earning money, but influential researchers have determined that there is little reward in blue-collar employment beyond the paycheck. This notion is challenged head-on by the workers presented in the next chapter. Although many accounts of manual workers extolling the rewards of their work exist in the sociological literature, that research has not influenced the way blue-collar work is regarded in most sociological research. Failure to incorporate the workers' perspective into dominant paradigms about blue-collar work has led to the interpretation of positive orientations to manual jobs as a function of cognitive dissonance or false consciousness.

When workers claim to enjoy their work and to find it meaningful and rewarding, researchers cannot explain those responses with theories that define blue-collar work as meaningless and lacking in intrinsic value. They therefore cram their findings into the explanatory categories they have crafted from the logic of their own class perspective. If workers report enjoyment in their blue-collar jobs, researchers often assume they must simply be trying to fool themselves into believing that their labor-intensive, subordinate, meaningless jobs are worthwhile in order to retain some sense of dignity in oppressive circumstances. The a priori assumption that there is nothing rewarding in blue-collar work is an obstacle to understanding working-class culture. To understand how workers see the world, researchers must be willing to listen to the workers and to take their logic seriously.

Blue-collar workers prefer blue-collar jobs. They prefer doing work that directly creates tangible, useful products through physical effort, skill, and knowledge. Working-class values do not appreciate the things that professionals find appealing and meaningful in their white-collar labor. The blue-collar workers represented in the next chapter and in Chapter 4 may or may not respect their white-collar counterparts, but they do not want their white-collar jobs and in many cases do not want to live like

them. Stratification theory depends upon a model of the occupational prestige hierarchy in which white-collar occupations are generally recognized as superior to blue-collar occupations. This reflects the standards of the professional class, not the working class. For the sample of blue-collar workers in this study, taking a white-collar job would be considered as a step downward, not the upward mobility presumed in social research.

Blue-collar workers have power. Manual labor is not necessarily subordinate to management or other white-collar supervisors. Managers are supposedly in charge, but formal authority chains are often inconsistent with the actual, informal reality at the point of production. College-trained managers often do not understand the jobs they oversee. White-collar workers with no experience on the job must depend upon blue-collar workers to complete tasks via their own knowledge—knowledge that typically can only be learned on the job. Blue-collar workers commonly have little direct interaction with white-collar managers. When they do, they often feel resentment toward ignorant managers who give orders without knowledge of what the job entails. When orders for completing a task come in the form of blueprints, experienced workers frequently must modify them to remove design flaws. White-collar managers have authority in theory, but in practice the system of production often depends upon the authority of the blue-collar workforce.

Manual labor is also mental labor. Blue-collar work is not mindless. It is a false dichotomy in theory that envisions mental work and manual work to be mutually exclusive, dichotomous categories. Blue-collar workers use their brains far more than the stereotypes suggest. Predictions that the mental aspects of blue-collar work would be completely eliminated have not been realized for the majority of blue-collar laborers. This leads to the next point.

Blue-collar workers are connected to their trades and their products. For both factory and construction workers in this study, blue-collar work is not alienating. The disconnection between workers and their products has not occurred to the extent that theorists have suggested. De-skilling may have occurred in many blue-collar jobs, but skill and experiential knowledge have not been eliminated. Even when much of the production process has been mechanized, blue-collar workers still must interpret changes in situations and make adjustments accordingly. Workers identify with the products they help create, even when their role in the production process is indirect. They show a thorough under-

standing of the entire production process and they see themselves as an integral part of it.

Blue-collar workers understand the social hierarchy differently than white-collar professionals. It is obvious to the blue-collar workers that professionals look down on them, but workers disregard that as ignorance. They have respect for blue-collar work, much more so than for white-collar work. At the same time, they understand that the economy requires all kinds of jobs and all kinds of workers. Professional positions do not deserve the disproportional compensation they receive; and although some of those positions may not be admirable or desirable, these blue-collar workers did see white-collar jobs as a necessary part of society. White-collar occupations and white-collar people are different—not necessarily better or worse than blue-collar.

Conceiving the social-class system as a vertical hierarchy in which the working class is inferior to the white-collar classes reflects a biased understanding of work and a narrow conception of social class. When work is understood in its complexity and when working-class values are acknowledged, the linear, hierarchical model for social-class inequality falls apart. It merely reflects the biases of the professional class. Of course, white-collar work has advantages at some levels, but at others it falls short of the blue-collar experience. Furthermore, working-class people may not regard white-collar work as appealing from their logical and moral perspectives, which in many important ways leads them to define blue-collar positions as superior to white-collar positions. The theory of a hierarchically stratified social order is disputed by the blue-collar workers represented in the following chapters.

Blue-collar work is rewarding and meaningful in many ways, and some distasteful aspects may be part of that. The negative attributes of a job can be as complex as the positive dimensions. For instance, some of the hardships that must be endured in the performance of blue-collar work can be seen as a positive reflection upon male workers' gender identities that include images of strength and toughness. And not only for men: for women, too, bearing the physical and mental stresses of manual work can be an indication of commitment and responsibility. (Data for this study excluded women, which is rationalized at the begin of Chapter 2.) Doing at least one's share of the work when on a crew creates bonds of respect among coworkers. Overcoming challenges may reflect highly upon the skill of a worker, and it may also signify that a

job is worth doing. A difficult job done well sets the worker apart from those who could not meet the challenge. Strenuous work is also a way for people to put "part of themselves" into a product.

Positive outcomes from the negative aspects of a job may exist beside the recognition that some jobs are simply hard or unpleasant—that they must be done and overcome if progress is to be made. In such cases, the job takes on a sense of importance. The negative dimensions of work are often the source of pride. Typically, blue-collar work leads to tangible outcomes, and the onerous parts of a job may just be something to accept in order to get the job done. In other cases, a job's negative attributes may be all bad (e.g., the insecurity of employment, vulnerability to outsourcing, and declining compensation); the distasteful dimensions of blue-collar work cannot be denied, and no job is perfect. Both aspects of a job must be accepted—the gratifying, rewarding parts alongside the disappointments.

The traditional methods of science have presented challenges for fully understanding blue-collar work. Work is positive in some ways and negative in others, but sociologists in the years following World War II were trained to analyze their data as though it gave support to either one general explanation or its opposite (or a series of mutually exclusive alternatives). The deductive reasoning of the social sciences at that time led to sweeping generalizations that described society in black-and-white terms. Researchers approached their evidence as showing that work was either intrinsically rewarding or that it was limited to extrinsic rewards. Middle ground was not considered. Researchers' deductions also imposed top-down explanations for behavior when inductive strategies would have revealed the complex reality of blue-collar work. The propositions listed above are not meant to negate the depiction of manual labor in the research literature that declares the opposite to be true. The negative depictions of blue-collar work may be accurate in some ways, but the real world is more complex than that narrow theoretical depiction.

Furthermore, researchers were motivated to analyze society according to the most sophisticated scientific methods available. The advanced statistical procedures that were made possible as computers transformed social research were poorly suited for understanding the complexities of issues regarding people's attitudes and orientations to work. The mathematical equations with which researchers examined their data looked impressively precise, but the data were gathered and interpreted in ways that distorted reality. Multidimensional experiences such as work are difficult to capture in one-dimensional survey questions. Multidimensional

variables were also transformed into indexes to meet the requirements of statistical analysis, which further narrowed the complexity and imposed biases into the research process.

Empirical Grounds for the Thesis

The research methodology and the sample of blue-collar workers presented below are more fully described in the Appendix. What follows here is a summary of the research process. The evidence for the claims about blue-collar work was gathered by participant observation and semistructured, open-ended interviews throughout the 1990s near a mid-sized city in the northeast United States. Throughout 1991, there was systematic participant observation of the occupational culture of a small, family-owned, nonunion masonry company that poured concrete foundations, laid block and brick, and poured concrete floors in the residential construction industry. Work dried up during the economic recession of that year, and observation shifted to a residential framing company for several weeks until work resumed with the masonry company at the end of that summer. A total of twenty-one construction workers, all white men, formed the sample population. An interview schedule was constructed from the field notes in order to gain further insight into the patterns that developed during the observation stage of the research. Men—specifically, men[17]—with jobs in construction or factories were asked to interpret the patterns recorded in field notes.

It took several years to conduct thirty-one open-ended, semistructured interviews. The author continued working with the masonry company throughout most of the research process and beyond. Throughout that decade, tremendous economic hardships made it necessary for the author to take work in supplemental occupations—tree care, dairy farming, numerous construction-related side jobs—as well as teaching evening courses at the nearby university and other colleges. The distractions slowed the pace of research, but they also combined to provide knowledge and an identity that was vital to representing the interviewer as a person of similar background to the men being interviewed. The researcher's working-class identity was not put on—was not an act. The fact that the workingmen in this sample were being interviewed by a man who himself was a mason gave them confidence: they knew they were speaking with someone who shared their experience and was committed to his trade.[18]

The sampling frame included any male blue-collar worker from either industry. This created a broad representation of blue-collar jobs in each category, and a broad range of age, skill level, and background. One of the misunderstandings of blue-collar work extends from the stereotype of manual labor as a job on a factory assembly line. It is unclear why, but perhaps because Karl Marx wrote of the transformative influence of machinery on labor in the mid-nineteenth century, researchers have frequently run to the nearest auto plant or similar factory to talk to assembly-line workers as representative of blue-collar workers in general. The result has been a generalization[19] of typical blue-collar work as alienating and meaningless. Data for this research included only two assembly-line workers, but that number is consistent with the percentage of factory employees who work "on the line" as reported in previous research that, even before deindustrialization, when US manufacturing was in its prime, was only around 5 percent.[20] The representation of assembly-line workers may have also been influenced by the type of products created in two of the larger factories included in the sample—locomotives and industrial-sized turbines. In these plants, assemblers did not have a work station at which products moved past them as, stereotypically, they do on an assembly line. Rather, workers performed their tasks on and around an object weighing up to hundreds of tons that was fixed in one place.

Snowball sampling techniques, beginning with encounters of convenience, were used to find informants from a diversity of job classifications, trades, skill levels, and work experiences within each industry. Interviews took place in a variety of settings. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The characteristics of the sample are summarized in the Appendix, Table A.

Ethnographic studies of blue-collar workers most commonly base descriptions of the working-class experience or of working-class culture on case studies of specific occupations or groups.[21] It is unclear if their findings are occupationally specific or if they can be generalized to the greater working-class population. This project sought to overcome that problem by investigating two separate blue-collar occupational categories that have been described as the two ends of the blue-collar occupational spectrum: factory work and construction work. These jobs are typically depicted as differing in levels of autonomy, skill, and intrinsic rewards.

Interviews of construction workers and factory workers indicate that, with regard to several themes, the two groups possess remarkably similar orientations to work. In the interviews, it is usually difficult to discern between the opinions of the factory workers and the construction workers

or between workers at different places in the authority and skill hierarchies. Data gathering was halted at thirty-one interviewees when, after accounts provided in interviews fit with findings from the field work, the consistency of their stories did not change regardless of the differences in their work situations. The author admits that saturation in data was a welcome rationalization for finding closure in the drawn-out research process. It is argued that the similarity in responses to interview questions, whether the subjects worked as laborers or craftsmen, were company owners or employees, were young or old, were union members or not, and whether they were highly educated or high-school dropouts, resulted from a shared working-class experience. This study argues that the consistency of the attitudes expressed by the variety of blue-collar workers reflects their internalization of a commonly held working-class culture.

Findings differ from past research on the meaning of blue-collar work for several reasons. First, the open-ended, semistructured interview design allowed for multidimensional responses that are not captured in surveys. The ethnographic research design allowed the workers to explain their circumstances and their attitudes about them in their own words in order to clarify the contextual logic for their feelings. Second, blue-collar work was not preconceived as negative or meaningless. That the interviewer, a concrete mason, shared an occupational identity consistent with the working-class informants allowed interviewees to recognize the researcher as "one of them." The sociologist Lawrence Ouellet has argued that perceived differences in occupational status between blue-collar workers and researchers has led to inaccurate responses from working-class individuals when the interviewer is identified as middle class.[22] Moreover, sociologist Mike Savage revealed that professional researchers' biases and theoretical categories may negatively influence the interpretation of interview data from working-class informants.[23] The working-class men did not have to wonder if their statements would be misconstrued. The interviewer spoke the same language as the interviewees, and if there ever were suspicious statements, they were quickly questioned.

Implications for Theory

The meaning of blue-collar work in social theory is not positive. It is regarded as the primary indicator of membership in an exploited and inferior class. Working-class culture is understood as shallow and unsophisticated. Blue-collar work is typically understood as tightly con-

trolled, meaningless, de-skilled, simplistic, and grueling. Researchers have created a devalued identity for blue-collar workers that then is used to support a simplistic, linear model of the social hierarchy that reinforces that negative identity. Stratification theory clearly states that the working class is inferior to—*beneath*—the white-collar classes. Negative connotations of blue-collar work are the basis for regarding working-class people as inferior.

This negative imagery is challenged by the words of the blue-collar workers—those who are briefly quoted above and others to be revealed in the following chapters. Their narratives do not fit the theoretical model that places the working class at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This finding calls for a rethinking of the way work and social classes are defined in social science. The depiction of the social-class hierarchy as linear and vertical is directly questioned by the workers in the sample. They make a strong argument that their jobs are intrinsically rewarding, that they are in control over much of the production process, that they do not want white-collar jobs, and that they have little desire to share the lifestyles of white-collar professionals. They show that there are positive as well as negative aspects to their jobs, and also to the jobs of white-collar workers. All types of work are important in the economy, they say, and all types of people are necessary in society. They make a strong case for depicting the social hierarchy in horizontal terms, where differences between stations are acknowledged but where social positions are not ranked as better or worse. The standards for judging which group is above another are too complex to generalize across class boundaries and thereby settle upon a consistent depiction of superiority and inferiority.

How can these blue-collar workers express such positive connection to their dangerous, dirty, difficult work? The positive association with their blue-collar work defies the logic of people in professional environments. The logic of popular culture suggests that there is something wrong with the people who perform physical labor, but these workers claim there is something wrong with the belief system that devalues what they do. Of course blue-collar workers are exploited under capitalism, but so are white-collar workers. There is a stigma that is reserved for jobs that are physically taxing, that are dirty, and, ironically, that produce the tangible things that everyone needs. Blue-collar occupations that create essential products are looked upon with disdain. As the miners, the construction workers, and the factory workers convey, however, those who create useful products through physical effort, skill, and experiential knowledge do not always see things that way. There is an alternative cultural logic in the working class that recognizes the dignity

and importance of blue-collar work. Rather than dismiss this logic as cognitive dissonance or false consciousness, we need to listen to working people who find their jobs rewarding and honorable.

The chapters to come expose the difference between the standpoint of working-class people and the way they are understood by social scientists. Social theory defines blue-collar work in limited, negative terms, while the blue-collar workers themselves see their jobs as positive. The interviews do not refute the fact that manual labor is disrespected, or that the work is often dirty, wearisome, and unpleasant, but they make it clear that the negative aspects are only part of the story. Most researchers approach blue-collar work from a theoretical perspective that is marred by faulty logic, erroneous assumptions, and inappropriate methodologies. Revision of this perspective is long overdue. As the flaws in its tenets are revealed, it forces a reevaluation of the longest-standing ideology in the social sciences. The scientific backing for the idea that some groups are inferior to others is a major obstacle to reducing economic and other types of class inequality. This book will not, and should not, bring about immediate change in sociological theory or class inequality, but by incorporating working-class viewpoints into the theoretical understanding of work and class, the legitimacy of beliefs that justify negative treatment of blue-collar workers is undermined. That is an important step in a positive direction.

Notes

1. Crawford (2009), *Shop Class as Soulcraft*.

2. Michael Parenti (1992) makes this clear in his *Make Believe Media*. He devotes all of Chapter 5 to the negative imagery surrounding working-class people, indicting the television and motion-picture industries for taking sides in class war. Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) addresses the issues similarly well in *Fear of Falling*, 107–120. See also Woollacott (1980), "Dirty and Deviant Work," and Hauhart (2008), "Blue-Collar Comedy Tour."

3. Cited in England et al. (2009), "Identity, Community, and the Crandall Canyon Mine Disaster."

4. *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973) is a good example: Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb judge working-class people's statements of pride and satisfaction in their work as simply an attempt to mask shame over lowly, blue-collar status. Further discussion of this in Chapter 7.

5. Parenti (1992), *Make Believe Media*, 71.

6. Durkheim (1984), *Division of Labor*. The importance of work in Karl Marx's theories is seen throughout his writings, from *The Communist Manifesto* through "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844" and "Wage Labour and Capital" to *Capital*.

7. Kerbo (2006), *Social Stratification and Inequality*, 208; emphasis in original.

8. Ainley (1993), *Class and Skill*, 70.

9. Beeghley (2005), *Structure of Social Stratification*, 183.

10. Ibid., 213.

11. Rose (2005), *The Mind at Work.*

12. Sabel (1982), *Work and Politics.*

13. See Reissman (1959), *Class in American Society*, 176, 361. Reissman writes: "The study of class is generally a middle class preoccupation."

14. Kerbo (1996), *Social Stratification and Inequality*, adds: "Because most social scientists are upper-middle-class (at least in education and occupational status, if not always income), in the past they have tended to present an overly negative picture of the lower middle class and working class. The working class especially has been viewed as authoritarian, bigoted, and harsh with family members": 240.

15. Taylor [1911] (1998), *Principles of Scientific Management.*

16. The short shop is the last stage of the lumber milling process, before the unusable scraps are ground into sawdust, in which the last valuable pieces of wood are cut from the remaining parts of a log after all the construction-quality boards have been taken.

17. Masculine-gender prescriptions have been identified as important elements in descriptions of the meaning of work; this study therefore controls for gender by sampling only men. Further research must be done to understand the meaning of blue-collar work for women (see the Appendix). It is interesting that the association of masculinity with blue-collar work has been so well documented: scholars must acknowledge manual labor as intrinsically meaningful in at least this regard. Many scholars still regard working-class masculine-gender prescriptions as a type of "cognitive dissonance" that provides blue-collar workers with psychological compensation for their subordinate status.

18. My surname, Torlina, is Italian (though ethnically I am German). My Italian name allowed me greater acceptance in my trade, which in the region is dominated by Italians. The owners of the company in which I worked were proudly Italian. However, all but four of the construction workers interviewed were of other European ethnicity.

19. Ouellet claims in *Pedal to the Metal* (1994), 12, that studies of workers and their orientations to work have commonly focused on those at the extremes of the occupational spectrum, such as assembly-line workers, who do not represent the experience of most workers. Robert Blauner (1964) suggests in *Alienation and Freedom*, 5, that "if the most alienated workers are viewed as typical workers, it is no wonder that there is a persistent tendency to view manual workers in general as alienated."

20. The 5 percent figure was Blauner's estimation of the percentage of blue-collar workers in the entire US labor force who work on assembly lines: *Alienation and Freedom*, 5. A similar report was made by Melvin Kohn in *Class and Conformity* (1969): "The degradation of work on the assembly line is far from typical of industrial occupations today. Even in automobile plants, most men do not work on the line": *Class and Conformity*, 194. Kohn cites, cf., Walker and Guest (1952) and Chinoy (1955).

21. For example, see Paap (2006), *Working Construction*; Lucas and Buzzanell (2004), "Blue-Collar Work, Career, and Success"; Metzgar (2000), *Striking Steel*; Ouellet (1994), *Pedal to the Metal*; Finlay (1988), *Work on the Waterfront*; Halle (1984), *America's Working Man*; Cockburn (1983), *Brothers*; Pfeffer (1979), *Working for Capitalism*; and Burawoy (1979), *Manufacturing Consent*.

22. Ouellet (1994), *Pedal to the Metal*, 14–15.

23. Savage (2005), "Working-Class Identities," 929–946.